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Organisation-led engagement with consumers in hidden social spaces

Abstract

Technological advances, the internet and social media provide consumers with instant means of communication where participants engage in the exchange of information about innumerable topics. Although most of these communications occur in the public domain within online groups and communities, some forms of communication are private and obscured from public view. Academics and practitioners refer to this supply of hidden social sharing and conversations that are invisible to most analytics programs as 'dark social'. This conceptual paper explores these communications, with respect to instant messaging, and considers how organisations can lead conversations to engage consumers in hidden social spaces. This is particularly apt when hidden social conversations concern brands, products and services as the subject of the communication. When appropriate to engage with consumers in hidden social, organisations must be clear on their role in the process and approach their hidden social connections with mindfulness and consistency.

Keywords: dark social, hidden social, instant messaging, social media, customer engagement

Introduction

With the proliferation of social media applications, individuals are increasingly sharing content and conversations on social platforms that are private and out of sight of organisations and brands. When these conversations concern brands or products and services, organisations must consider their prevalence, and the issue becomes if and how to engage consumers in these hidden social spaces.

Industry marketing companies suggest as much as 84 per cent of brand communications happen via hidden social channels such as e-mail, native mobile apps, copy-and-paste links in instant messaging (IM) and texting.¹ Customer comments or recommendations communicated in hidden social, to limited audiences, may be a better reflection of the customer's true feelings than comments posted on public platforms. Furthermore, as individuals who share are nine times more likely to purchase than individuals who do not, sharers become valuable consumers in a brand's ecosystem. Approximately three-quarters of converted sharers and three-quarters of converted clickers take place in hidden social.²

The expansion in hidden social represents a significant challenge for brands as worldwide IM user accounts (excluding mobile messaging accounts) are expected to grow from over 5.8 billion in 2017 to over 8.3 billion by 2021, representing an average annual growth rate of 9 per cent. A rise in chat or mobile-based messenger apps such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Kik and WeChat further fuels this growth.^{3,4} At the same time, with 90 per cent of social marketing investment directed at public platforms, hidden social provides marketers with a potential area of opportunity. As messaging apps are becoming an essential part in the consumer's everyday life, this paper provides organisations with a framework of how to engage with consumers in organisation-led IM conversations. The paper explores the context of business and sociality, covers aspects of IM, and discusses the nature of instant conversations. As social interactions in private conversations can be powerful, organisations should gauge how to tap into these conversations. To this end, the paper explores the different roles the organisation can adopt in this interaction and discusses the significance of intention and approach in consumer engagement in hidden social. Finally, the paper covers the desired outcomes of hidden social engagement, namely value for the participant and word-of-mouth (WOM). In this paper, academic–practitioner collaboration provided a window into an important reality — a collaboration without which access to the area of hidden social would have been difficult.

A Framework for Organisation-led Engagement in Hidden Social

This paper is based on a schema for IM-based engagement in which the organisation is the initiator of the IM group, and consumers are invited participants. The engagement will require business to partake in sociality — something that will involve intention and a suitable approach on behalf of the organisation. A main aspect of this schema is the framework outlining the various roles the organisation can adopt when engaging consumers in IM (see *Figure 1*). Consumers, on the other hand, control both their conversations and perceptions of brands and organisations. The aim of hidden social interaction must be to create value for both the organisation and participating consumers, with the desired outcome that participants will share their experiences and in doing so, spread the message or benefit.

Sociality and Business

Individuals are increasingly active in social networking spaces where they can create and perform community.⁵ In these spaces, they have access to new sources of online information such as social networking sites, blogs, chatrooms, rating websites, media-sharing websites and podcasts.^{6,7} These networked social media platforms are producing sociality and

connectivity. Sociality is scalable, and individuals can be extremely public or extremely private, or have a very small group or a very large group with whom they communicate.⁸ Furthermore, individuals can choose at any time to engage in sociality according to their wants, needs or desires.⁹

Social media can transform one-to-many broadcast communications into many-to-many social media dialogues¹⁰ — a reality that requires new approaches to the relationship between the organisation and its consumers.¹¹ Engagement involves reaching consumers where they exist online, forcing organisations to develop media strategies that capture reach, intimacy and engagement.^{12,13} Individuals tend to associate with others of the same kind and as a result, their personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many socio-demographic, behavioural and intrapersonal characteristics.¹⁴ This tendency has significant implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form and the interactions they experience. The strength of the ties between consumers who are exchanging information depends on the amount of time spent together, emotional intensity and degree of intimacy in the relationship, and the level of reciprocity.¹⁵ Furthermore, consumers are demanding tangible value in return for their time, attention, endorsement and data.¹⁶ The communication intention should primarily be about mutual exchange, which is, giving to others without expecting something in return. Focus must therefore be on helping strangers, investing time in general community activities and doing so without expecting a payoff.¹⁷ At times, it may require the organisation just to be present in the communication space.

The popularity of social networking sites encourages marketers to use these networks to achieve their brand objectives¹⁸ and as the de facto way to distribute information about their brands.¹⁹ Social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and user-generated content sites such as YouTube, have divided this communication space into niches for social networking, exchanging pictures, video sharing, IM, and so on. Two of the main tools that enable individuals to connect, communicate and interact with others in their social networks are social networking sites and IM.²⁰

In contrast to formal marketing communications, social communication takes place without a deliberate attempt to seek or give opinions.²¹ The tone of voice is very important — the voice must be human and not corporate. Some of the challenges with the spontaneous nature of informal communication are the ability to locate and get the attention of conversational participants, and interruptions that may affect the regularity in the conversation. Unlike discrete bounded communication events, participants in IM conversations choose when to respond, resulting in conversations that can span over longer periods. With IM, the organisation can manage the conversation progress, by changing the communication medium during an interaction, for example, from IM to e-mail or phone.²²

The differences between digital and face-to-face relationships are anonymity, connection, physical appearance and time. The relative anonymity of digital communication may allow individuals to take greater risks in their disclosures than they would in a more traditional setting. However, the lack of visual cues and shared surroundings may present the organisation with validation challenges regarding both participants and their disclosures. Without the ability to assess physical appearance online, relationships will develop based on similarities, shared values and interests, and engaging conversations.²³ Although the short-term effects of IM include immediate gratification of individuals, research suggests participants do not view IM as a venue for meaningful conversation.²⁴ IM requires quick, brief and therefore more superficial responses, whereas in e-mail, individuals have more time to construct their messages.

Conversation is only possible through a common understanding around availability, the ability to establish connection by abiding within and maintaining a shared communication space, and the ongoing work of managing the progress of an interaction.²⁵ Agreeing availability begins with the way in which actors enter the conversation. The process typically involves social listening, identifying, initial contact, followed by a formal interview, which may involve a questionnaire and/or an interview in person or on the phone, and finally a process to facilitate onboarding to the group. During this process, the participants must agree that they will converse about a particular topic.

Individuals participate in the creation of content on social media as a mechanism of risk reduction, to change perception and influence people, to fulfil feelings of power and control, and to participate in social discussions to communicate and connect with other people.²⁶ The organisation must therefore sustain hidden social connections with a gentle approach and consistency.

Instant Conversations

While e-mail has long dominated internet communication technology, individuals now communicate instantaneously with one another in real time using chat rooms and IM.²⁷ IM provides close to real-time communication between two or more users and has become an essential part of interpersonal communication insofar as enhancing communication among friends and family, making plans with one another, and maintaining social contact outside of day-to-day face-to-face conversations.²⁸⁻³⁰ Individuals generally use IM to maintain a small network of fellow IM users rather than to connect to new users.

Although the mobile phone is used as a narrowing-down medium — to communicate with people with strong ties — users tend to use IM as an expanding medium.³¹ Unlike e-mail, which is unable to notify a communicator when the recipient is available, IM has the ability to provide shorter turnaround times and quicker responses.³² This and the additional features of presence awareness, within-medium simultaneous communication, silent interactivity and fleeting transcripts are appealing to the organisation. Compared with a number of other technologies, IM is one of the more suitable alternatives to face-to-face communication.^{33, 34} Many social networks embed their own IM services, leading to a richer communication experience for users. The average user is inclined to have multiple IM accounts to communicate with contacts on different networks.³⁵ IM is versatile in supporting awareness, agreeing availability, intermittent conversations and flexible information conversations. The textual conversation maintains conversational context and facilitates intermittent interaction, leading to a more robust communication space.³⁶ In this space, consumers' willingness to become involved and, to a lesser extent, their perceptions of the business or brand will influence whether they will participate in organisation-led interactions. By blending into consumers' communication spaces, organisations may be able to supplement current relationships and boost existing patterns of social contact and involvement.³⁷

Organisation-led Consumer Engagement

In virtual brand communities, customer engagement involves 'specific interactive experiences between customers and the brand, and/or other members of the community'.³⁸ Furthermore, customer engagement concerns the intensity of connection with and participation in an organisation's offerings or activities, which either party³⁹ can initiate. Multiple authors have emphasised the cognitive, emotional and behavioural or activation dimensions of consumer brand engagement (CBE).^{40–42} In a particular consumer–brand interaction, cognitive processing relates to a consumer's level of brand-related thinking and elaboration, affection to the level of positive brand-related emotions, and activation to the consumer's level of energy and effort spent on a brand.⁴³ Engagement reflects a motivational state,⁴⁴ which occurs because of an individual's key interactive experiences with a particular engagement object or brand.^{45,46} For CBE to happen and lead to a consumer–brand connection and intention to use the brand, the consumer must first be involved in the process.^{47,48}

This engagement reflects the value of social capital or the notion that individuals and groups can gain resources from their connections to one another.⁴⁹ Here, social capital aids the transfer of information — both its transmission and seeking,⁵⁰ providing consumers with

the experience of cooperation, the exchange of ideas and information, innovation and valuable insight into brands or organisations.

The above applies to consumer–organisation engagement in hidden social; however, there are some differences. In IM groups, members may not necessarily be customers; they may come and go, and therefore not necessarily have a relationship with the brand or organisation. The organisation or brand becomes the container for the engagement. The ‘content’ or ‘creation’ in the group — not the brand or organisation, sits at the heart of the process. Consequently, participant–content engagement in hidden social has a spirit akin to civic engagement, where the aim is to develop the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to promote the quality of life through active or passive participation.⁵¹

There is a positive association between the dimensions of CBE (cognitive processing, affection and activation) and consumer self-brand connection, with affection’s impact on the self-brand connection being the most significant.⁵² Unlike with a self-brand connection where the focus must be on activities and tactics that support consumer affection and activation to develop consumers’ intention to use the brand, in hidden social, connections focus on perceived usefulness and enjoyment. Experiences consistent with a uses and gratification approach, such as information, practical use, pastime, social, stimulation, identification, transformation and negative emotion, apply to IM groups.⁵³

When individuals enjoy participating in a social community, they will perceive a better interactivity with the group and consequently experience flow; and when they perceive interactivity as enjoyable, their participation with brand-related content strengthens CBE.⁵⁴ Engagement hinges on participants’ experience with the group, whether utilitarian (such as providing information) or engaging (such as providing entertainment or pleasure).⁵⁵

Whereas online engagement is designed to communicate brand value,⁵⁶ organisation-led engagement in hidden social will require more of an altruistic focus and actions congruent with longer-term intentions.⁵⁷ Consumers can easily recognise when a brand builds and manages an online brand community with extrinsic motives of profit exploitation and will therefore be less likely to engage. Similar to online brand communities, members of IM groups may view the organisation’s participation as a type of sponsorship whose primary aim is to promote the brand and its products.⁵⁸ Consumers tend to be sceptical about the intrinsic motives of altruism in brand-created online brand communities, whereas consumer-created online brand communities engender such motives.⁵⁹ Organisation-led IM groups must resemble consumer-created communities where the expectation of existing and would-be members is to share knowledge about a brand or product with no extrinsic motives of profit exploitation. Organisation actors who are more sensitive to the needs and desires of the

audiences with whom they interact will be more successful;⁶⁰ thus, the organisation must seek to harmonise with consumers' ordinary networks, fostering IM communications in existing social relationships and following actors' patterns of civic engagement and socialisation.⁶¹

Motivations for Engaging with Consumers in IM

IM interactions share several of the characteristics of informal face-to-face communication, such as being advantageous, context-rich and brief.⁶² Individuals use IM predominantly for communication among friends and family members and this communication can be active, passive or both by creating and receiving information and content. The external rewards for using IM include elements such as praise and useful information, among others.⁶³ Internal rewards on the other hand refer to the pleasure derived from interacting with others, or the enjoyment and pleasures conveyed from those partners.⁶⁴ The perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment are noteworthy in explaining an individual's behavioural intention to continue to use IM.⁶⁵ Consumers who actively participate in social communities are more likely to engage with the brand if they have strong and trusting connections with the social community.⁶⁶

In social interactions and relationships, both commitment and attachment are important⁶⁷ — attachment motivation drives the need to keep in constant contact with others, and relationship commitment the need to maintain established relationships.⁶⁸ Research suggests that users want both the benefits of instant communication and enjoyment when using IM services.

The ease, lack of risk and immediate gratification may draw individuals to mediated interactions.⁶⁹ Substitute social activities may be chosen frequently because they are accessible, require little effort and entail less psychological risk; however, they may not have the long-term benefits of cultivating true, deep connections between people. Chatting or sending IMs online with a stranger fall within the middle of this continuum, but more toward the substitute endpoint. Substitute interactions may be particularly compelling in the short term, but they fail to provide the depth and support given by strong in-person relationships.⁷⁰ Actors do not always use IM for direct information exchange, but often indirectly to create and maintain a sense of connection to others.⁷¹ In these exchanges, feelings may become more prominent than the actual attainment of the information. The move from public social networks to more private mobile messenger apps has significant implications for marketers.

Marketers should take into consideration that the human characteristics such as valuing fair treatment, wanting to help others and seeking status from peers are important. Similar to

successful online communities, the effectiveness of IM groups will depend on the ability to connect with like-minded people, the cooperativeness of the communication space, a focus around compelling topics, and effective moderation and facilitation.⁷² The group must provide the necessary cognitive and sensory input equivalent to that of the more concrete real environment — something that enhance instrumental and experiential value⁷³ as discussed earlier. A compelling experience associated with the state of ‘being there’ can help to establish a favourable attitude to the organisation.⁷⁴

The obstacles to making IM groups work centres on the ability to attract and get actors to engage and participate. Once engaged, the organisation must remember that participants are in control of the selection of content, timing and the act of communication.⁷⁵ Such active control requires not only the attention and participation of individual users and communities, but also that of the organisation in its role in the social group.⁷⁶

A further issue pertaining to IM groups is what happens when participants leave the group, either voluntarily or in the case of being asked to leave, as this can create unrest and divisions within the group. In this regard, the organisation must manage the situation based on a set of predetermined procedures regarding how long the group will be running, how quickly participants will be getting a response to a message from the administrator and the group code of conduct.

Equally important is how the organisation plans to address the around-the-clock nature of online interaction. A hidden group could potentially cross over different time zones due to people being in different locations around the world, so clear guidelines regarding participation are required so that participants do not receive alerts during the night. Hidden Facebook groups provide the option to include a description about the rules of the group and response times, whereas WhatsApp does not allow the inclusion of such descriptive text.

Furthermore, conversations may be intermittent and if not facilitated by chatbots, will require human facilitation. From experience, the best hidden groups are where the community does most of the talking and the organisation just helps to guide regarding key objectives such as sharing content socially, asking for opinions, or creating content (e.g. video) to be shared on public platforms. Making use of chatbots to reply to all messages, or at certain times of the day, for example outside office hours, will reduce the requirement for human resources. However, for some IM groups, a ‘talk to human’ button may be a requirement, and with it, humans to reply. To engage with consumers in hidden social spaces, organisations must consider a number of issues.

If entry by the organisation into the hidden social space is appropriate, the issue becomes how to create social relations with consumers in these spaces. At the core of any initiative is mindful engagement.

The Organisation's Role and Industry Relevance

When organisations get involved in hidden social spaces, the role of the organisation in the social group must be clear and explicitly stated to all participants. The role will be related to the organisation's objectives, for example, *why participate and what is in it for the organisation?* Practitioner experience suggests the organisation can assume a number of roles, such as fact finder, manager, facilitator and director (see Table 1).

The role of fact finder will require the organisation to be curious, open-minded, user-focused, approachable and innovative. The director's role will require the ability to create an overall vision and be decisive, whereas the role of manager will require empathy, honesty, accountability and patience. Finally, the role of facilitator will require listening, the ability to communicate and resolve misunderstanding. In each of the hidden social roles, the organisation must adopt the necessary measures to inspire trust between participants.

Furthermore, in IM spaces, organisations have the opportunity to connect with actors and their emotions during the purchase decision stages of problem recognition, information search, competitive evaluation, purchase decision and post-purchase.⁷⁷ In stark contrast with the level and intensity of communications in open social spaces, IM breaks down social barriers and allows participants to tap into each other's knowledge — the sense of community in IM enables participants to become more aware of the others in the group.⁷⁸

Social sharing by consumers varies significantly by industry. For example, in the Asia-Pacific region, automotive (82.4 per cent) leads to hidden social sharing, followed by finance (72.1 per cent), FMCG (61 per cent), retail (56.3 per cent), travel (56.2 per cent), technology (54.9 per cent), music (45.9 per cent), entertainment (45.2 per cent) and sport (38.3 per cent).⁷⁹

Approaching Consumers in Hidden Social

Communication in hidden social media may be especially productive for brand managers as they constitute a link for large information depositories.^{80,81} Therefore, brand managers should approach these communications in the three ways described in the following sections.

Mindful engagement

Marketers must remember that one of the main reasons that individuals use social media or social networking sites is to connect with a network of family and friends.⁸² It is about individuals and their networks, and person-to-person connectivity. Marketers are able to reach individuals wherever they are; however, in personalised social networks where connection is between individuals, it is about autonomy, opportunity and uncertainty.⁸³ In their social network relation with consumers, the organisation must engage from a place of transparency, authenticity and honesty. Although this should be the practice in all communications, as marketers aim to leverage social media to their advantage, most brands appear inauthentic and their presence intrusive. In hidden social, transparency, authenticity and honesty are not negotiable.⁸⁴

A successful communication campaign not only influences an audience directly but also indirectly influences a wider target audience. The role of the media shifts from message execution to an increased understanding of the consumer.⁸⁵ Practitioners must therefore design and order information from the consumer's perspective by focusing on consumers' perceived quality (usefulness, accuracy and importance) first and the perceived authenticity (trustworthiness, credibility and reliability) next. In addition, practitioners should consider peripheral perceptions related to authority and the level of interest in the communication.⁸⁶

Regular contact is at the core of relationships with friends — friendships are at greatest risk of failure when they are new. Although social network sites make communication easier, a common concern is that technology introduces a false sense of connection. Furthermore, computer-mediated communication does not help the constraints of cognitive capacity, time limit, and the number and quality of relationships the individual can maintain. Computer-mediated communication is also less rich and more prone to misunderstanding than spoken conversation.⁸⁷

Ultimately, individuals will find ways to negotiate their terms of engagement in social networks, and organisations must respect their choice regarding how, when and with whom they engage, and when to be offline, 'unhearing and unheard'.⁸⁸

Finding and engaging interested participants

Marketers have adopted three categories for online and offline media activity, namely owned, earned and paid media. Owned media refers to the brand's websites and other owned content; earned media to WOM and online social media; and paid media to all forms of advertising. Organisation-led hidden social involves owned media during the start-up phase and then relies on earned media.⁸⁹

Finding consumers in hidden social spaces and connecting with them in ways that encourage WOM message movement is a significant challenge. Here the organisation must draw on the basic human need that motivates individuals to engage in WOM, namely to help others by giving advice, and to share the joy in finding valuable information.

As influencers tend to pass along information that they consider both trusted and unique,⁹⁰ one of the aims of the organisation must be to identify influential individuals in social networks who are interested, knowledgeable or active in a particular category or area.⁹¹ The subject focus of the group will provide the space where people with similar interests can connect and commune.^{92–94}

There are two possible ways of creating organisation-led groups in hidden social media. The first is to approach the organisation's existing customers with an invitation to enter the IM space. For example, a 2018 Time Magazine 50 Genius Technology company offered its users a 'walled garden' to host private communication between the business and its users. The organisation devised strategies and directed users to publicise the start-up on open spaces by giving them viral content to share and inspiring them to create user-generated content (e.g. memes). The content was then removed to create a sense of scarcity, which attracted others to join the group. Such approaches could be based on interests and pastimes (e.g. football, rugby, film, music and e-sports or gaming) or information and practical needs (e.g. related to health) of customers.

The second way is to grow the group organically by starting with a few handpicked individuals and then getting members to nominate new members to the group. A European Telecom company and a main sponsor of an international sports team took this approach: a hidden social initiative involved identifying and on-boarding users of the ideal demographic and encouraging them to act as brand ambassadors. The organisation facilitated the generation of fun challenges, original content and exclusive perks to keep users animated and 250 influencers found that sharing their content about the brand and team became a natural part of their social existence. Either way, the organisation must consider its role in the group, as well as the nature and *modus operandi* of these private groups.

Managing social relationships

Engaging in conversations with consumers via social media has significant potential for organisation-led customer relationship management (CRM).⁹⁵ However, the prevalence of social media is challenging the notion of CRM in that organisations are no longer the main actors responsible for the management of customers. Instead, customers play an active part in the relationship, with the added ability of broadcasting their opinions to large audiences.⁹⁶

Similarly, participants in hidden social are in control of their relationships with the organisation. This rise in consumer power, the new social CRM and the co-creation of content are just some of the issues organisations must address.⁹⁷

Instead of managing customers, the role of the organisation must be to facilitate collaborative experiences and conversations that customers will value.⁹⁸ A crucial first step toward a social CRM strategy is to understand what customers value. Most consumers interact only occasionally; socially speaking, their interests lie in friends and family, not brands. Customers expect something tangible in exchange for their time and personal data.

IM apps are becoming more than CRM platforms as they are increasingly able to address consumer queries at all stages of the customer journey, from product discovery, to purchase and customer experience.⁹⁹ Managers must assign employees with higher levels of attachment motivation and relationship commitment to manage the real-time electronic connections with customers. These employees may become the IM virtual community to promote shared understandings, facilitate idea generation and knowledge dissemination.¹⁰⁰

Emphasis on Value Creation

IM spaces themselves can contribute to the flow experience of participants, and in doing so create value for consumers.¹⁰¹ The main sources of value concern information and interactions. Organisations must therefore use information and their interactions to create functional, experiential, symbolic and cost value for participants.¹⁰² Useful, reliable and effective communications or services aimed at providing information to consumers, deliver functional value. Next, information that creates feelings such as pleasure, achievement and peace of mind in the participant will strengthen experiential value. When consumers attach meaning to the information or service, they create symbolic value, and finally the reduction in time to search for solutions due to the information will deliver cost value. Engaging consumers in co-creation of, for example, content for a support group, or video material for an event, will satisfy their need for interactive, collaborative and personalised interactions.¹⁰³

On the other hand, the organisation can use personal and responsive interactions to provide functional value for participants, connectedness and relational bonds in interactions to create experiential value; symbolic value through the sense of benefit present in interactions with participants; and cost value through the reduction in personal investment by sharing issues through interactions with others. For example, a facilitator role in organisation-led engagement may involve the creation of content around sports events, or survival/coping stories in health settings, such as a pregnancy group where the dedicated group can bring

significant value to both members and a health service. Finally, for the organisation, the value created through hidden social participation must be balanced with the associated costs such as labour costs and the funding required to create and manage the interactions.

Spreading the Word

Changes in how people socialise and expressions of community are a reflection of the technological advances and transformation in communications, where traditional face-to-face WOM conversations about products and services are now taking place instantly within electronic media.

WOM communication takes the form of informal advice between people about products, services and social issues.¹⁰⁴ Community and participation in social media enable individuals to engage with brands as a mechanism of risk reduction, to change perception and influence people, to fulfil feelings of power and control and to participate in social discussions to communicate and connect with other people.¹⁰⁵ The essence of markets not only depends on brand messages generated by the organisation, but the consumer conversations these markets generate.¹⁰⁶

The online voice involves three aspects of communication, namely the sender of the message, the message itself and the framing of the message.¹⁰⁷ Quality, authenticity, authority and interest are paramount in WOM information.¹⁰⁸ To attract the attention of consumers, the information must be engaging and of relevance to the intended audience. After accepting the information, a resender may remember the information or share it with others.

IM is one way in which WOM messages are communicated on the internet; however, messages communicated by IM are the least referable form of WOM as they are neither publicly available nor archived. Unlike WOM messages that are published on the internet, less referable forms of WOM, available to a limited number of people and/or only for a limited time, offer few opportunities for a consumer to make contact with unfamiliar others who might have particularly impactful or useful information.¹⁰⁹

The ability to generate positive WOM among consumers has become an important tool for marketers. Identifying influential individuals in social networks and connecting with them in ways that encourage WOM message movement is the challenge. The goal is to fulfil the basic human need to help others by giving advice and share the joy of finding useful information and to motivate individuals to engage in WOM. Influencers tend to pass along information that they consider both trusted and unique.¹¹⁰ Consumers of the organisation-led interaction can share

their consumption experience with their social networks¹¹¹ and actively refer the experience to others.

Conclusion

The requirement to engage with consumers through social media is placing immense pressure on businesses.¹¹² As the majority of social sharing takes place in hidden social spaces, organisations may have little choice but to meet consumers there. Organisation-led participation in hidden social groups can come in various forms, for example in facilitating that community, by providing information, fuelling interactions, to a more instructive role. Organisations must fulfil their roles in hidden social by way of respectful and ethical conduct and practices.

Communications in hidden social typically occur within existing social networks where the motivation to communicate ranges from the sharing of information to social connectedness between family and friends. Organisations are on the outside of these social networks, but by becoming an outsider who participates as an insider, the organisation can bring valuable insight, support and energy to the group. When in these spaces, organisations must aim to foster consumer engagement, co-creation and brand ownership, and in doing so, establish a foothold within networks with consumers who share insight. Furthermore, consumer involvement and empowerment through content creation in brand-building experiences may have a positive effect and favourably influence their perception and trust in the brand or organisation that may exceed loyalty to an objective assessment of brand value.

The potential for future exploration of this topic is extensive; for instance, the conceptual information of this paper can establish empirical work in the areas of participation and content creation. Subsequent studies may investigate the effectiveness of IM conversations regarding participant-to-participant and organisation-to-participant relationships, evaluating the participants' motivation for engagement, as well as the value provided. Additionally, further research is required to understand the perceived quality of these conversations in relation to usefulness, accuracy and importance, as well as the perceived authenticity of conversations in terms of trustworthiness, credibility and reliability.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Organisation-led engagement in hidden social

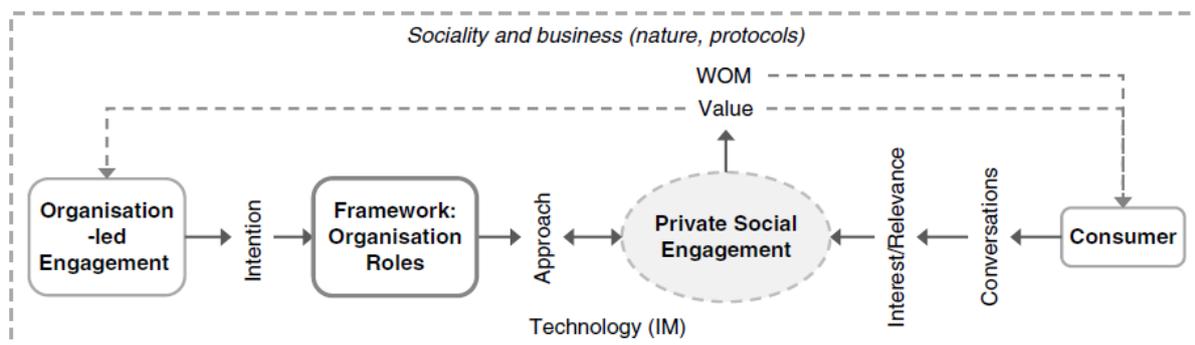


Table 1: Organisation's role in IM group(s)

Organisation's role	Participation objective	Industry examples
Fact finder	To consult, explore, probe or find out	FMCG: obtain feedback Entertainment: solicit real opinions
Manager	To maintain, guide or oversee	Politics: community management
Facilitator	To aid, help, ease, simplify or further	Health: provide support Travel and leisure: concierge service
Director	To guide, lead or handle	Sport: crowdsourced filming